

Editorial

Dear reader

A year ago, I shared my thoughts with you on Boko Haram. Since then little has changed. The organization continues to kidnap and kill within the oppressive atmosphere of violence and fear it has created. Ironically enough, it was prime minister David Cameron's cynical gaffe (while speaking to Queen Elisabeth of all interlocuteurs) to the effect that the Afghan and Nigerian leaders are heading 'fantastically corrupt' countries, that injected fresh momentum into the push to combat Boko Haram cells in the country. Last year I highlighted that there were commitments from a number of organisations and countries to send military support and even money to aid in the fight against Boko Haram. In the wake of Cameron's remarks, Nigeria's Vice-President Yemi Obisanjo revealed that an estimated \$15 billion in funding allocated to the military had been stolen; a figure that dwarfs earlier estimates of around \$5 billion. The money, he went on to say, had been siphoned off through fraudulent arms contracts handed out by the administration of former President Goodluck Jonathan. Throughout this period the Islamist insurgency was expanding. Several allies of the last government are now facing corruption charges. In one prominent case, General Sambo Dasuki allegedly embezzled funds allocated for military hardware. He denies any wrongdoing (source: The World Weekly). One can only hope that the money will be recuperated and used for its intended purpose: to provide the means to deal with Boko Haram. The flash visit of French president François Hollande to the security summit organized by Nigeria's president Muhammadu Buhari in early May 2016 will hopefully add to the new commitment.

The opening paragraph here feeds into the reality that much of the news from Africa is about civil war, corruption, drought, hunger and suffering. However, for the most part, life on the continent of 1.1 billion is getting better. It was just a couple of years ago that "Africa Rising" was a hot story, as a continent best-known for tragedy gained attention for rapid economic growth and real hope. The slowdown of the global economy and slumping commodity prices have dampened that enthusiasm somewhat, but there are still positive longer-term trends across Africa that deserve attention. Economically, the good news might be that the middle-class is growing. And with it the market for consumer goods is also growing. The latter is fuelled by the success of mobile banking that brings credit and money to the demand side. Civil society is also becoming stronger, also thanks to an increased use and popularity of the social media. The latter has resulted in more public interest in who wins which elections and how. Historically, African elections have often been 'stolen' according to the old principle that it's not who votes that counts but who counts the votes. As results from Nigeria's 2015 election began trickling in, volunteers at polling precincts tweeted unofficial vote counts under the #Nigeria

Decides handle, helping to ensure transparency throughout the vote-tabulation process. The result? Power was transferred peacefully to Muhammadu Buhari, the first opposition candidate to win a free and fair presidential election in Nigeria. That may be why Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's recently re-elected strongman, shut down WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook on polling day. There's a reason he's been in power for 30 years. Transparency in that country will take a little longer. Perhaps for the same reasons, there seem to be fewer civil wars and violent coups in Africa. As *The Economist* recently reported, since the cold war ended, the number of armed conflicts on the continent has fallen from more than 30 to about a dozen today. Organized violence still plagues the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Somalia and South Sudan, not to mention Burundi, but the risk that war will metastasize to neighbouring countries is not what it was.

However, other forms of violence remain a problem. In 2014, 11,934 Africans were killed in terrorist attacks, a 250 % increase on the previous year. Nigeria's Boko Haram (aligned with ISIS) and Somalia's al-Shabab (affiliated with Al Qaeda) have been particularly brutal. But managing the threat from Islamic militants gives African governments more in common with Europe and the United States, increasing opportunities for mutually profitable cooperation. That is at least progress of sorts.

I briefly mentioned Burundi in the above list of, well let's be frank, failed states in Africa. Most news feeds on the country present a gloomy picture of strife, corruption and instability. It is certainly no picture of progress; and nobody can say when or if the situation will improve.

In *Afrika Focus* we offer a scientific forum where young scholars can report on their work. I hope that this issue's content will provide a tonic against the rather bleak outlook described above. The articles report on new developments and work-in-progress that will hopefully help strengthen the foundations on which the continent will sustainably develop. One article concentrates on how to deal with post-traumatic and reconciliation matters. The ethnobotany article provides an example of what plants can bring to local populations, and by extrapolation to the sub-region, or even continent. Although millet is a marginal crop for Tunisia, the report presented here shows the way forward to developing new synthetic varieties at low cost, and using local germplasm. The fourth article presents a case study of language education in Mozambique, focusing on the difficulties of acquiring a foreign language. I hope you will agree with me that such papers offer a much more vibrant picture, that of progress!

Patrick Van Damme
Editor-in-Chief